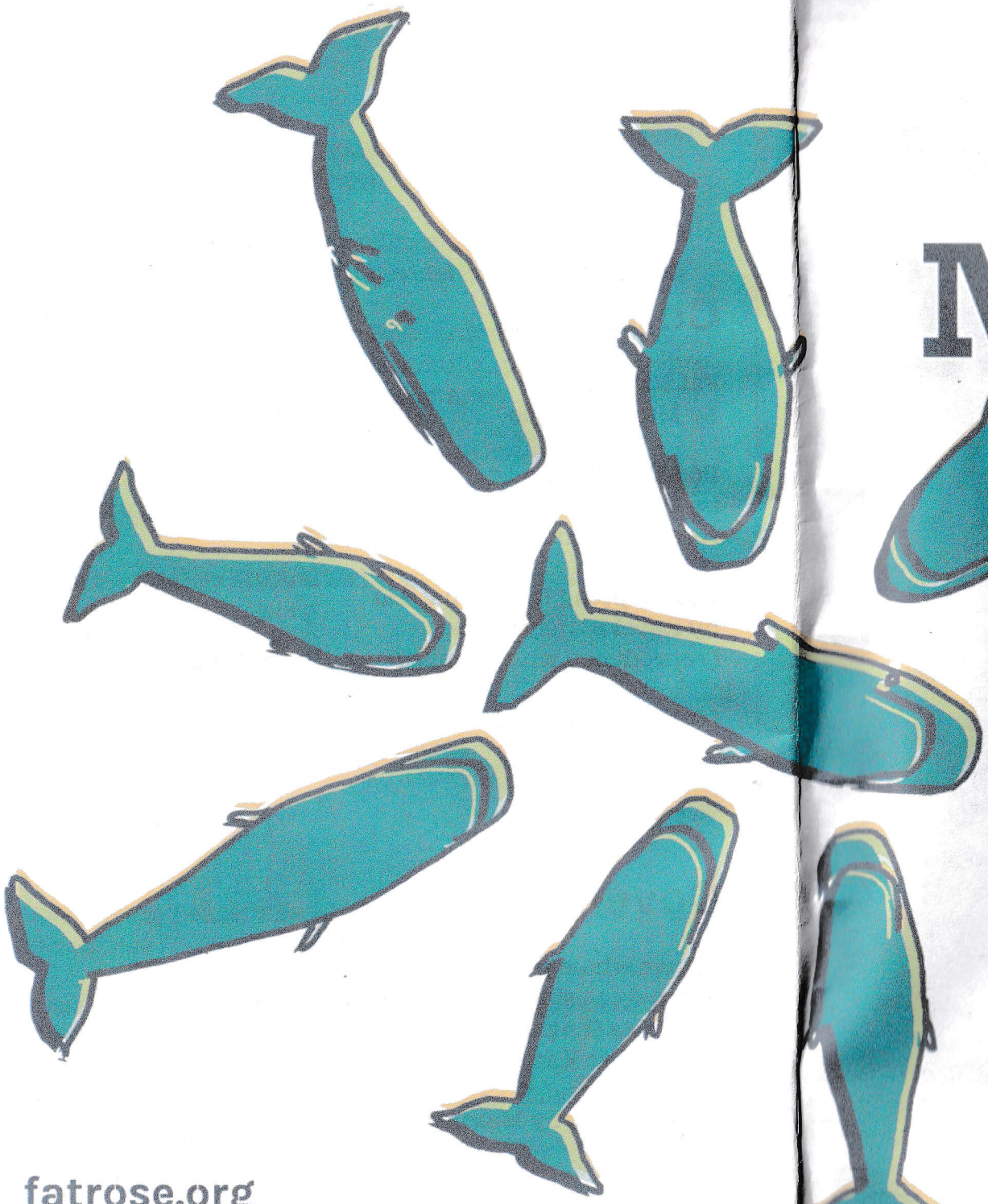


fatrose.org

Fat Mutual Aid

+ pod mapping for mutual aid

[Image description: A comic panel hand-drawn by Max Airborne. The words "FAT MUTUAL AID" are in large letters across the top. In the square below, two fat friends sit in a medical exam room, waiting for the doctor. One sits on an exam table, wearing a too-small paper gown that's open in the back, showing their naked back side. They face their friend, who sits on a chair, holding open a large pamphlet or zine, entitled "How to Resist: Making Sure the Doctor Doesn't Kill You & Your Fat Comrades." A fat fist is on the zine cover, the word "RESIST" on its wrist. A clock, a stethoscope and a blood pressure machine hang on the wall.]

FAT MUTUAL AID

by Max Airborne
10/04/21

Why Fat Mutual Aid?

In this era of environmental crises, pandemics, and the visibility of community efforts to care for each other, I want to address fat-specific mutual aid. I'm speaking here mostly to fat people, but I think these ideas are also important for all those doing mutual aid projects in communities where there are fat people, which is everywhere.

Fat people are often excluded from community mutual aid efforts (e.g. lack of awareness and/or care about fat risks or access needs). Fat people can also be targeted by mutual aid efforts in dangerous, fat-hating ways (e.g. "food justice" projects that focus on fat kids losing weight).

Many folks on the left, including folks doing mutual aid work, have not questioned the dominant narrative that says fat people are to blame for our fatness, and that fatness should be eradicated. This results in a culture of shaming, neglect, mistreatment, surveillance and punishment toward fat people that is isolating & deadly.

Fat people, disabled people, and other folks often pushed to the margins need to be part of community organizing and mutual aid just like everyone else. We are not disposable.

There are fat people doing a lot to care for each other – personal care, resource sharing, emotional support, community organizing, advocacy, providing fat liberated-zones for each other.

Fat people have the best wisdom about surviving and living fat life.
We need each other to survive.

And, I am still dreaming of a world in which our lives are considered important beyond our silos. Many fat people are isolated. Fat people are left to die in disasters (both hurricanes Katrina and Sandy saw this). I want a world with such strong solidarity, and fat-and-crip liberated community mutual aid that these murders would be impossible.

What is Mutual Aid?

Mutual Aid is people working together democratically to figure out how to meet each other's needs, while also organizing against the oppressive systems that are creating or exacerbating the needs.

Mutual Aid is, by definition, revolutionary. Caring for each other is a threat to established society. The state doesn't care for us and it will not save us. Mutual aid is about survival, working together, and building solidarity and collective power to dismantle oppressive systems and build the world we want.

If we dream of a world in which all beings are cherished, practicing mutual aid is one way to start embodying that world. If our mutual aid efforts are really going to be part of movement building and world changing, they need to include fat and disabled people.

Many communities have been practicing mutual aid forever. And the forces of white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and other oppressive systems have for generations been working to disempower us: severing our connections to each other, to the land, to our own bodies. Mutual aid is a way to uncover what we know deep in our bones – that survival and connection and belonging are our earth rights.

What is Fat Mutual Aid?

When I think about fat mutual aid, I think first about fat people supporting each other, and how vital this is and has been to our survival and wellbeing. I doubt I would be alive without the fat people who have cared for me.

Fat people, especially politicized fat people, have taught me how to live in the fat body I have, how to care for my fat self, how to navigate the fat-hating world and how to fight for fat liberation. Fat people provide empathy and outrage when I deal with anti-fatness, and celebration when I experience fat joy. Fat people help me feel less alone. Fat people show me what's possible.

All of this is mutual aid.

Here are some recent, concrete examples I've seen of activities that I think could be called "fat mutual aid," because they are mutual aid efforts that include and meet the needs of fat people. Most of these occurred in fat liberation community.

- A fundraiser for a fat, disabled person who needs a scooter
- Support when a fat person is sick
- Connecting with fat folks who are isolated

- A fat clothing swap/giveaway/benefit sale
- Organizing or offering fat/crip-accessible housing
- Organizing fat/crip communities targeted for denial of care during a pandemic
- A gathering of fat folks sharing fat hygiene wisdom
- Showing up for the family of a fat person killed by police
- Supporting a fat person with house tasks
- Sharing and nurturing joy with fat folks
- Finding generators and batteries for folks who need electricity to power CPAPs, ventilators and other medical devices during a wildfire season power shutoff
- Checking in on fat folks during emergencies
- Sharing tools and resources that support fat bodies
- Supporting a fat person to deal with their fat-hating family
- Witnessing, listening, emotional support
- Planning a fundraiser for superfat folks who need clothes
- Fat folks cooking together, or for each other
- Supporting fat elders, fat crips, fat youth...
- Bringing a friend to a medical appointment to provide witness, solidarity and advocacy
- Sharing personal care: foot care, washing, skin care, hair cuts
- Giving a fat person an accessible car ride

Some of these are examples of fat people connecting with each other. But not all of them. Fat mutual aid can and often does include the non-fat people in our lives.

Fat people are everywhere, in every community. Our lives and experiences are inseparable from the world, and determined by all the other, intertwined aspects of our existence — race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and more. In addition to our own efforts to support each other, we need the support of allies, and we need to be supported as fat people within the contexts of our whole, diverse communities. We need our experiences to be heard and respected. We need our lives to be valued, in the bodies we have now. We need this revolution to abolish fat hatred and ableism.

Fat Mutual Aid Pods

An important way to access the kind of mutual aid we need is to create a group, or "pod," that's focused on it. A "pod" is a small group of people who self-organize to provide support to each other in whatever ways they mutually agree to.

A few examples of pods:

- A **natural disaster** mutual aid pod that prepares for and deals with emergencies together.
- A **COVID** pod who all agree to protect each other from infection.
- A **mutual aid** pod that comes together in response to a person's or group's specific or general needs
- A **transformative justice** pod, meant to support someone who has been harmed, or to support accountability for someone who has caused harm. (introduced by Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective)
- An **organizing** pod, more often called an "affinity group," that does direct action together.

One example of a fat mutual aid pod:

All members are fat, long-term friends. The group shares information, emotional support, witnessing, fun, food, cooking, medicine, CPAPs, money and other resources, foot care, haircuts, skin care, checking on each other, healthcare advocacy, housing as needed, rides... Members of the pod have different needs at different times, and the pod members seek and offer support as needed.

Some of the support mentioned in this example involves trust and an understanding of each other's access needs, or "access intimacy" (a term from Mia Mingus). These relationships will take time to develop if people don't know each other well from the start. That's ok!

You don't need to be coupled or partnered to be in a pod. Let's debunk the myth that the only place we can build trust and intimacy is in the context of a sexual relationship.

If your mutual aid pod includes people who aren't fat, there may need to be more trust building and education about fat bodies, anti-fatness and the specific needs and abilities of the fat folks in the pod. It's important that your pod be curious about you and your needs, and that you develop enough trust in the group that you can share honestly what your needs are.

Sometimes as fat people we might be reluctant to ask for or receive help, especially from folks who aren't fat or explicitly in support of fat people. We have received lifetimes of blame, shaming, and abuse for our fat bodies. It's no surprise that we might not feel safe acknowledging or exposing our needs. It takes time to build trust.

Getting Started with a Fat Mutual Aid Pod

1. When you think about fat mutual aid, what do you need? And what can you offer?

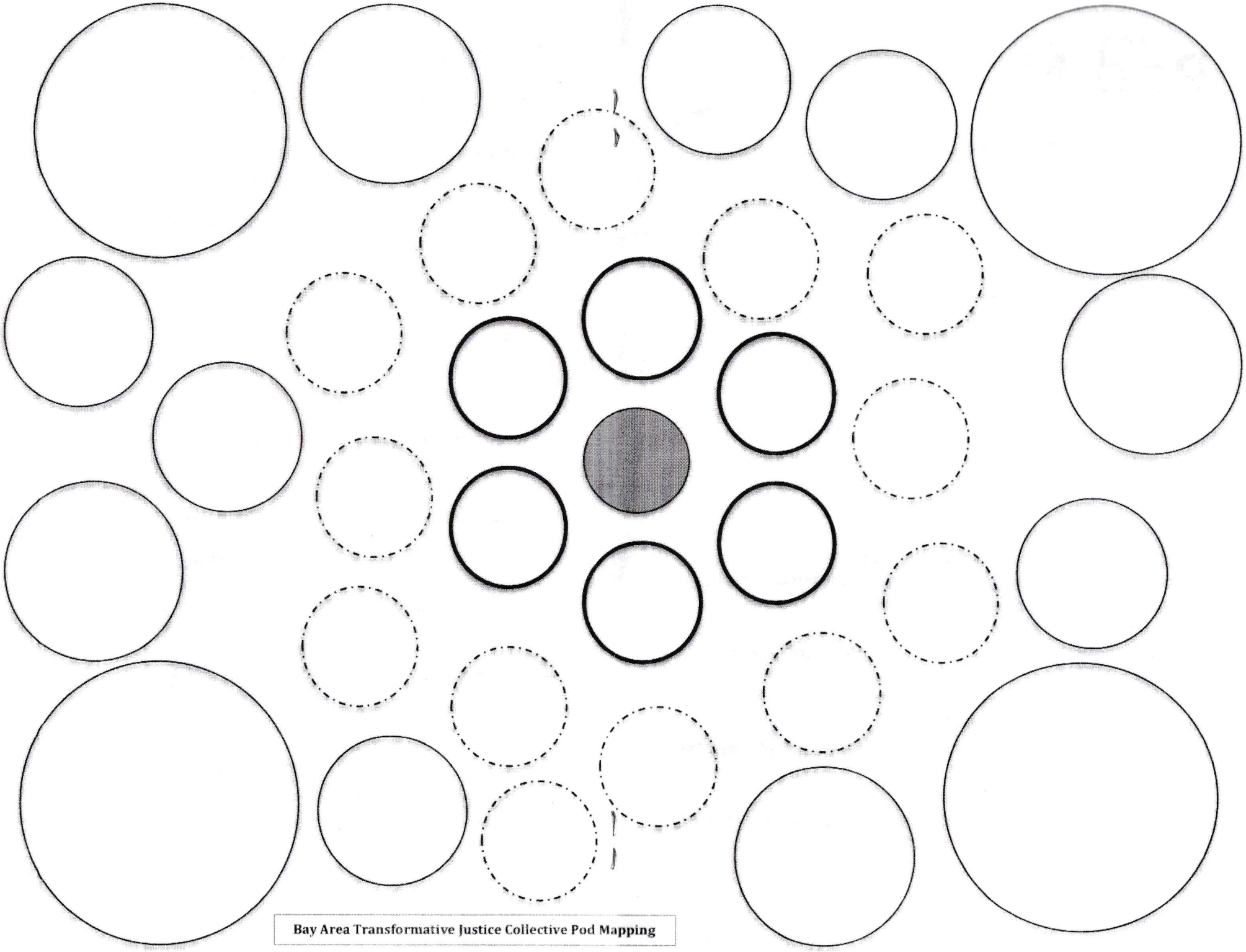
   Who's in your pod? Start by thinking about the people closest to you and what skills, resources and care you can offer each other.

2. Check out the next article, "Pod Mapping for Mutual Aid" – by Rebel Sidney Black, who offers a good example of how to map the people and groups in your life using the BATJC map style.

   You may already be part of a pod, or something like a pod – a care team or affinity group or a group of friends or kin or other kind of community. In my experience, one advantage of actually naming it something (whether "pod" or something else) is that it can create space for conversations about what we each want or need, as well as to get explicit about shared intentions, expectations, boundaries, and agreements.

3. Follow this conversation and connect with other fat mutual aid organizers at @fatmutualaid on Instagram, or at fatrose.org

Shout out to the fatties, crips, fat liberation, disability justice and BIPOC communities for sharing so much wisdom about how we can survive by connecting with each other.



Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective Pod Mapping

Pod Mapping for Mutual Aid

By Rebel Sidney Black
3/9/2020

Mutual aid can look many different ways. Those of us who are sick and disabled, black, indigenous, multiracial, and people of color, poor, working class, immigrants, queer, trans, two spirit, and more, probably already practice mutual aid and may not even know it. Mutual aid is that random person from the internet bringing a hot meal when you can't get out of bed, it's cleaning or spiritually cleansing the home of someone who's too severely depressed to do it themselves, it's staying up late talking to that suicidal friend, helping unpack an apartment after someone moves, giving rides to chemo, visiting or writing letters to folks in prison, walking someone's dogs when they can't walk them themself. It can also look like sharing coping skills, survival skills, job search skills. Mutual aid can be sharing medicine, making medicine, helping sift through allopathic doctors to find a good fit, or referring someone to that awesome working class naturopath you know. Mutual aid can also be fighting to change the structural causes of oppression so that everyone can be more free.

I'm writing this as COVID-19 is taking hold in my region, people are talking about social distancing as a form of survival, and I'm thinking about all the people who are already housebound and having a hard time making

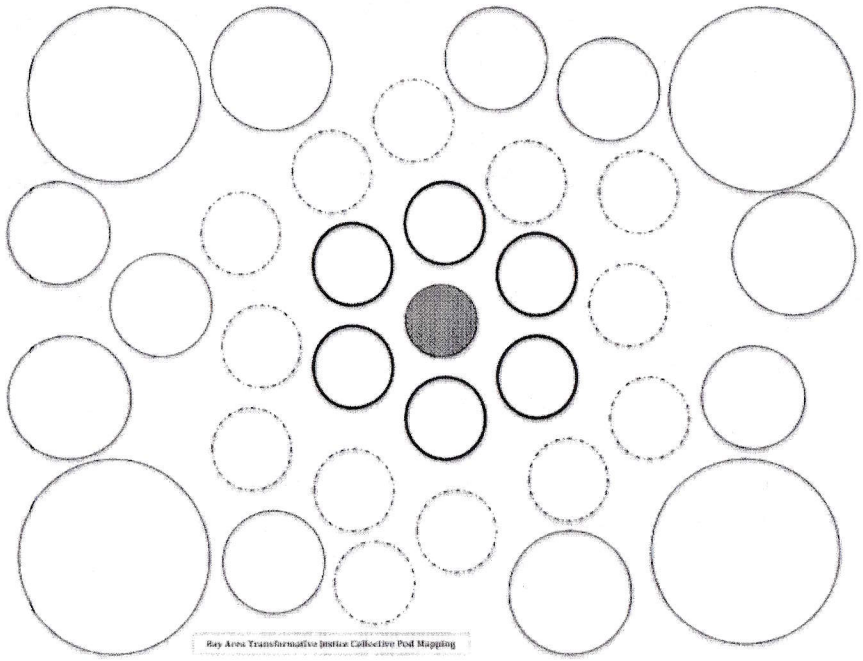
ends meet, getting needs met, and who need social support to survive. I'm thinking of my houseless and elderly neighbors, my immunocompromised friends who may need food but also protection from any germs I may be carrying. I'm thinking about how we survive together rather than apart. Even if together means Zoom hangouts, texting, leaving groceries on the doorstep and not coming in to say hi.

Mutual aid can happen between two, twenty, or two hundred people (or more!). A good place to start, though, is with your "people." Whether that's your one best friend, some folks from church, or the handful of acquaintances you never hang out with but who came through that one time when things were really tough, it's important to assess who would show up for you in a crisis or emergency, and who you'd do the same for.

This is where "pod mapping" comes in. Originally developed by Mia Mingus for the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, pod mapping is a tool specifically for accountability and dealing with harm in communities. However, it can also be adapted to help you assess who you can rely on in a pinch—who you'd turn to for support and who would turn to you. These groups may or may not overlap. You may also have different pods for different situations.

A "pod" is a microcosm of "community." Since it's more concrete, it's easier to get organized—to connect, make a plan, and follow through if and when it's needed. There may be certain qualities you look for in the folks in your pod(s): maybe they're really reliable, well-resourced, generous, committed, kind. Maybe they have certain skills that you don't and need. Maybe they live nearby.

Here's what the pod mapping worksheet looks like:



[Image description: A page of circles. One central gray circle, surrounded by several layers of other circles. Closest are 6 dark-ringed circles. Next outward are 13 dotted-line circles. On the outside are 14 circles of varying larger sizes.]

In the center circle, write your name.

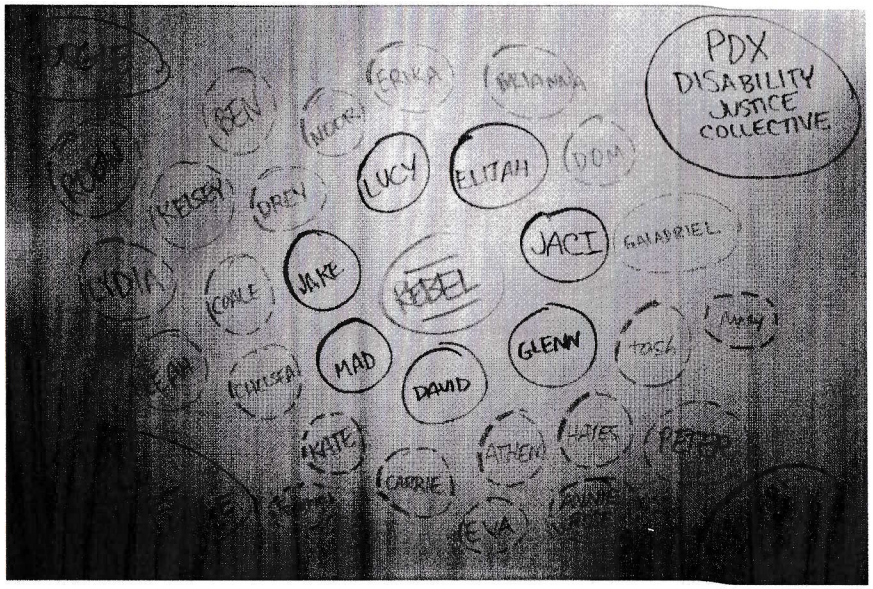
The dark circles are your pod. It's important to write specific names, as well as what supports they can provide. Is it a neighbor who has a generator that will charge your wheelchair when the electricity is out? Is it someone who can buy and drop off groceries? What about a friend who will take care of you when you're sick? Talk to your people and ask what they feel able to provide. Then ask them what they need from you to be in their pod, or let them know what you can offer.

(Mutual aid is mutual.)

The dotted lines are people who are movable—they could become part of your pod if you have some conversations and build relationships.

The larger circles on the outside are bigger community groups, networks, organizations, etc that could be resources for you.

Here's my pod map as an example. I don't have everyone's skills written down because I still need to have those conversations. But as I have more information, I can continue to fill it in. Like, "Do you want to be part of my disaster survival mutual aid pod? OK cool, what do you feel like you can contribute? I can bring meals and groceries, provide emotional support, and have a couple extra inhalers. We have a safe place where you can come and stay in our guest room if you need it."



[Image description: A Image description: whiteboard with circles in four different colors and names in each circle. My name in the middle pink circle. My pod in purple circles. Moveable people in teal dotted circles around the pod. Groups where I can get support in red circles at the outside.]

Use this tool in the way that works for you. And don't forget where it came from—this is a resource created by BATJC to designate who could be a support in being accountable for harm, holding someone else accountable for harm, or who could help you if you witnessed harm. Honor where it came from and who created it.

Lots of love,
Rebel Sidney Black
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rebelsidneyblack@gmail.com

Resources

Tools & Connections

Big Door Brigade mutual aid toolkit: bigdoorbrigade.com

Fat-Assed Prepper Survival Tips for Preparing for a Coronavirus Quarantine: bit.ly/FatSurvival

Fat Mutual Aid: You can download a PDF of this zine at fatrose.org

Half Assed Disabled Prepper Tips for Preparing for a Coronavirus Quarantine, by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. bit.ly/disprepguide

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief mutualaiddisasterrelief.org

Pod Mapping for Mutual Aid (Rebel Sidney Black) bit.ly/podmap-mutualaid

Pods and Printable Pod Mapping Worksheet (Mia Mingus and BATJC) bit.ly/podmapping

Survival for Folks Who Need #PowerToLive During a Power Shutoff. bit.ly/powertoliveguide

[Image description: Drawing of a fat person with short hair serving soup with a giant ladle from a giant pot into a bowl. In the background a long table with folks seated ready to eat by candlelight, and the word NOURISH.]

Articles

Abolish Time (Estelle Ellison)
@abolish_time on Instagram

Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice (Mia Mingus) leavingevidence.wordpress.com

Cripping the Resistance: No Revolution Without Us (Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, post at Disability Visibility Project) bit.ly/crip-resistance

How Disabled Mutual Aid is Different Than Abled Mutual Aid (Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, post at DVP) bit.ly/disabled-mutual-aid

Insurrectionary Mutual Aid (Curious George Brigade) theanarchistlibrary.org

POOR Magazine poormagazine.org

Books

Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness (Da'Shaun L. Harrison)

Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice (Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next) (Dean Spade)

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Cover image

Sperm whale pod defense
When danger approaches, a pod of sperm whales encircles the pod members who are more vulnerable. (Thanks to Katie Loncke for sharing this inspiration.)

Illustrations by Max Airborne